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8 Performative Subjects
Migrants and Their House-Building Practices
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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this chapter is to investigate the relationship between agency and subjectivity of migrants in relation to their everyday practices of house-building in the immigrant-receiving countries. It argues that there is a productive relationship between human subjectivity and building practices, and more specifically that the migrant's participation in their own house adaptation, extension and building assists in extending their subjectivity into the broader cultural and social system. Migrant houses in Australia are cultural products that present intriguing images of sameness and difference, invariably perceived negatively as representations of un-Australian ideas and aesthetics. This contradiction between the positive efforts to be productive and to belong through house-building and the negativity of the reception of the house as product creates a field in which both assimilation and resistance occur.

This chapter will consider these issues through Judith Butler's theory of performative subjectivity (Butler 1993, 101-129). Butler has emphasised that performativity refers less to the idea of a single act or enactment as a theatrical and major event, and more to the reiterative everyday practices that enable or disenable normative subjectivity. Butler's detailing of the production and yet exclusion of identities focuses on gender and sexuality but her argument can be brought to bear on any strong binary structure, including the host-guest binary structure that serves to reproduce ongoing exclusions in the ways that nations are imagined, naturalised and normalised (Butler 2004, 204-231). In this chapter, Butler's theory will be translated and reappropriated onto a spatial and cultural context using the migrant house as the object of investigation. It claims culture, race and ethnicity are performative practices, like sexuality. It will consider the migrant's actions in the production of the migrant house via three points extrapolated from Butler's theory. Firstly, if practices related to houses and house-building are central to the regulatory production of normativity, how and what are the exclusionary frameworks that operate to divide between migrant and non-migrant house-building practices? Secondly, can migrant house-building practices as temporal process introduce a pathway for migrant subjectivity? And, thirdly, Butler's question of which bodies matter frames the argument between skilled bodies and unskilled migrants.

This chapter will draw from extensive typological and visual documentation of migrant houses in several areas of Melbourne, Australia—the inner-city suburb, Northcote, and other northern suburbs (Thornbury, Preston, Epping) that were destinations for southern European migrants (Lozanovska 2009; Winkler 2009; Gantala 2009). This broad approach is elaborated by two in-depth projects—the first explored brick-veneer houses constructed by migrants constituting a migrant enclave in Northcote (henceforth called the Northcote Enclave). Seven houses of immigrants from southern Europe, predominantly Italy and Greece, who migrated during the 1950s and 1960s, were examined in 2009 (Lozanovska 2009; Gantala 2009). The second project, carried out in 2001, complemented the above by examining alterations to three existing housing typologies—a timber worker's cottage, a Federation-style bungalow detached house and a newly built brick veneer. These were inhabited, adapted and owned by elderly first-generation Macedonian migrants who have lived in their houses for thirty years or more.

Northcote study of existing housing typologies:

Figure 8.1 House Turquoise is a Victorian worker's cottage.
The methods used included in-depth interviews with the migrant dwellers of the houses, photographic and architectural documentation of the house and recollections of the house in the original homeland. The chapter is in two sections. The first section sets up a historical background of migration in Australia and the theoretical framework of subjectivity and migration through Butler's theory of performativity. This provides the ground for the discussion of the house-building practices of migrants in the second section.

HISTORICAL AND NATIONAL NARRATIVES OF MIGRATION

Studies on modern Australia have stated that in the most fundamental sense it is the product of immigration, a point cleverly reiterated by a controversial Immigration minister (Castles et al. 1998; Ruddock 1997). The paradox of Australia's relationship to migration was that it produced one of the world's most ethnically diverse countries by advocating the superiority of British culture (Castles et al. 1988, 50). The inflow of people (from Europe, America and Asia) into Australia attracted by the Australian gold rush brought the population to three million by 1900 (Hawkins 1974, 23). By 1947, the non-European population (other than Aborigines) was measured by the Census as 0.25 percent of the total, a result of the exclusionary White Australia Policy implemented in 1901. Australia had become one of the 'whitest' countries in the world outside north-western Europe (Jupp 2002, 9). The government had set a paradoxical trajectory of Australia's history by transforming the nation from a potentially plural society to an exclusionist, homogenous and racist Anglo-Celtic society (Murphy 1993).

The turning point of the Second World War found the government developing a huge immigration campaign (Jupp 1991, 71). By the 1950s, the desirable sources—primarily the United Kingdom and the "blue-eyed and fair skinned" Nordic nations—diminished; southern Europe, while least racially desirable, became the major source of immigrants (Kunek 1993, 93). Melbourne was a major Australian gateway for thousands of immigrants from Italy, Greece and later Yugoslavia each year (Burnley 2001; Department of Immigration and Citizenship 2007). Representations of such post-war migrants were of unskilled, uncultivated and undesirable people that were meant to fill the arduous and unsafe jobs unwanted by the host-citizens of the nation (Burnley 2001; Murphy 1993). Studies have elaborated on the continuing concentration of post-war non-English migrants in lowly status employment, boosting the development of the Australian manufacturing industry (Storer 1981; Lack and Templeton 1995).

Large-scale labour migrations were generated by short-term market interests and nation building, rather than a desire to create multi-ethnic societies (Castles et al. 1988). Different ways to manage the impact of this
influx of diverse peoples is evident in the immigration policies, which can be summarised as follows: 1947–1964 ‘Assimilation’—assimilation programs included the adoption of the English language, English values and lifestyle and advice not to behave in a way which would attract attention (Castles 2001, 93; Jupp 2002, 19). From 1964 to 1972 the policy known as ‘Integration’ responded to the realities that many migrants did not speak English when they arrived, worked in factories or construction sites and lived in like-cultural communities. In 1973 ‘Multiculturalism’ was introduced, and for a short time, ethnic minorities were supported in the preservation of their cultural identities (Jupp 1996, 5).

Nations wanting growth participate in the fantasmatic dimension of an infinite and relentless capitalism (Cope, Castles and Kalantzis 1991; Sayad 2004). Migrants were considered labouring bodies in the economic equation; and in Butler’s terms, their needs, traditions, desires, lives were not eligible for recognition. Additionally, their skills and capacities were not acknowledged. Migrants were paid markedly lower salaries but incurred higher rents or mortgage repayments, endured hardship and had little support (Storer 1981, 4; Lack and Templeton 1995). In this context the emergence of the migrant house is strange and powerful paradox. The migrant house is the house occupied, adopted, extended or built by migrants, and it is a knot in the narrative that the migrant is lowly, unskilled and does not belong because it illustrates dignified existence, skill and domesticity. In contrast to the complex analysis of migration, there is a stark omission of both interest in and analysis about migration and housing (Price and Martin 1976; Junankar et al. 1993; Lozanovska 2011).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SUBJECTIVITY AND MIGRATION

Butler (1993) argues that reiterative practices are integral to a discourse on power. Normativity is a temporal process of the production of these practices as part of the regulatory forces within the power structures of society. “Performative subjectivity” refers to a forcible reiteration of the norms that are mobilised by the law through labour and the repetition of the actions that effect the materialisation of that norm. Normativity is thus consolidated through the reiterative practices. This aspect of Butler’s theory establishes the theoretical framework for the analysis of assimilation in relation to the house-building practices of migrants. Assimilation into Australian society is par excellence the ownership and construction of a house, and it is this regulatory apparatus of power that the migrant participates in. The migrant reproduces the ‘house’ (materialisation of citizenship, order, domesticity) as integral to the norm of Australian society. Butler speaks of the “assimilating passion by which an ego first emerges,” and this is illustrated in the excitable attitude of migrants towards their houses and therefore towards assimilation (Butler 1993, xxii).

An emphasis on “precarity” in Butler’s theory considers the differential allocation of who is recognisable within the symbolic and actual law as citizen (Butler 2009). All subjects are already acted upon prior to performative practice, but some have a more precarious, marginalised, lawless position from which to act and from which to perform agency. Some subjects are eligible for recognition, while others are less so or not at all. Considering this exclusionary matrix, the house built by migrants is appropriated within the normative apparatus and yet excluded from the laws constituting the norm. The excluded is within the very logic of the cultural and national symbolic. In other words, the migrant house is a house, but it is not recognised as an Australian house.

However, the “paradox of subjectivation” refers to the resistance to norms enabled by such norms, emphasising agency as immanent and not an opposition to power. Butler’s theory of “citation” enables an analysis of the way the migrant house is very similar to the normative Australian house. But performativity may also be considered as “citational politics” whereby a temporal process brings attention to the gaps and fissures that exceed the norm and make resignification possible (Butler 1993, 28). This chapter discusses the following question: what do inhabiting, occupying, adapting, or building a house mean if a migrant with different social and cultural references carries out those actions? Butler (1993) has argued that a human body only qualifies as a body that matters according to a constructed domain of cultural intelligibility, giving rise to questions about the performance of skills and capacity against a norm related to the migrant as unskilled. Citation becomes a critical resource in the struggle to become a subject, especially within a politicisation of the norm in which the migrant is a priori not a host-citizen and therefore not allocated subject status.

CULTURAL CONFRONTATION

Australian cities have been historically planned according to pragmatic and expedient modes of settlement in which a gridded subdivision is superimposed over the topography of the land (Gleeson and Low 2001). The ubiquitous suburban block results in a strict matrix of single and detached house morphologies, producing a powerfully adhered to image of a normative Australian urbanisation (Butler 2004, 206). The ownership and construction of a house is a central indicator of an “Australian way of life” (Junankar et al. 1993, 7; Troy 2000, 724; Lewis 1999, 41). As a result Melbourne has developed into a vast suburban web, firstly developing concentrically along the lines of train and tram transportation, then in the post-war developing as sectors with low-rise, low-density suburbs of brick-veneer housing. More recent fringe regions have their own distinct urban centres due to the distance from the Melbourne CBD (Central Business District). The style of the early housing established a dominant British origin that mixed with an
Australian myth of the 'Aussie battler' and dominated the culture of the suburbs (Ang 1999, 194; Castles et al. 1988, 8; Gleeson and Low 2001, 55). A political limit of the apparatus of assimilation and its exclusionary matrix about what counts as Australian can be seen in the representation of the migrant house.

Many of the households have narrated their migration as a process involving adversity. In the early period of arrival, male migrants were in rental accommodations, sharing one room with several other individual male migrants in other people's houses, where often "if you go out, you came back like a cat (you had to be quiet). The Australians wanted it quiet" (Lozanovska 2009; Gantala 2009, 21; Storer 1981; Lack and Templeton 1995, 97). Female migrants were accommodated with other migrant families, vulnerable to the patriarchal hierarchies. The policy promoted assimilation, but the reality of the migrant's entry into society was by way of becoming invisible, squeezing into the tiny crevices of existence.

House and land acquisition by migrants has presented a problem to immigrant receiving societies that have imagined a national unity through hegemony and homogeneity (Butler 2009, vi). Many migrants built their own homes in the context of the severe housing shortage after World War II (Lewis 1999; Davison, Dingle and O'Hanlon 1995). The house makes claim to land, capital and cultural and national space, and for the migrant is pivotal in the trajectory of settlement and assimilation, promoting fields of belonging and rights to citizenship. The houses of southern European migrants made the most visible prominent impression on the architectural and urban environment in Melbourne. Their houses presented a confronting image to a public that had held a lowly perception of migrants. Enacting the desires that belong to a normative subject has exposed the unspoken limit of the assimilation equation and that the migrant's place has never been settled within a national host-guest imaginary (Vulker 1986; Lozanovska 2011). In other words the migrant house claims a right, but operations of exclusion rewrite this "performative act" in the negative: both that the migrant does not have this right, and that the house is not 'Australian'. The migrant house performs a social function of the 'norm' within Australian society and yet announces the limits of assimilation, illustrating what Butler has defined as "a phantasmatic field that constitutes the very terrain of cultural intelligibility" (1993, 15).

In addition to the space of the suburban block, The Northcote enclave evolved after the local convent subdivided the southern section of its landholdings in 1962. The planning pattern deployed the court or cul-de-sac. Each block was sold separately but on the same day in 1965, and five of the houses have remained with the original purchasing families. This urban form of courts has contributed to the formation of the social structure of the neighbourhood: "if you can imagine the street at its height, there was a lot of children (playing on the street), making a lot of noise. [A former neighbour] would come out in his pyjamas and yell at everyone."
Enclave represent the characteristics of typical migrant houses built in the 1960s, their close proximity has produced a neighbourhood context. The house is both a pragmatic and fictional construction, and involves memories, desires and fantasy (Gardiner 1975; Rybczinski 1987). The aspiring migrant makes a crucial decision—to build a house. The households in the Northcote enclave expressed strongly that the decision was for procuring land on which to build a house and imagined their houses expressing their identities and transforming the land, similar to the architect's desire to work on a blank white page. Further, they organised the realisation of that idea into a built house. Like others, the dream of household Trieste was for a modern, enduring, dignified brick house, horrified by the small timber houses (Lack and Templeton 1995, 103). She looked at books and magazines for inspiration, resulting in the modernising systems of a pantry and built-in wardrobes, rare amongst her friends at the time.

House-building was carried out by the household with the assistance of a network of migrant members of like homelands. Men carried out much of the construction work, and the women and children contributed and maintained an environment that was nurturing and productive (Lozanovska 2009; Gantala 2009). Many first-generation southern European migrants have deployed their skills—carpentry, plumbing, painting, concreting and joinery work—calling on particular expertise (Church 2005). These practices have been described as communal festivities (Sagazio 2004, 73–92). Less researched are the skills of sewing and crafting that were employed in the fabrication of the interior of the house, including making curtains, sofa covers and seat cushions. Household Abruzzo’s late husband was a skilled concreter from the Abruzzo region in Italy. The high-quality finish of the concrete in the garage and basement was done by sprinkling a layer of ‘dust’ (cement) and working it to attain a smooth and polished finish to the surface. A social network of immigrants from like homelands was developed alongside the processes of assimilation. This might be considered a ‘homeland-cultural’ parallel Australia through which the migrant could both be informed and disseminate information on several significant factors: where there is work, how you can find accommodation, how you can buy a house and who has the necessary building skills to assist with the construction of the new house (Lozanovska 2009; Gantala 2009, 26–30).

Terrazzo or a pebble mix was evident in all the houses in the Northcote enclave as the preferred paving of the exterior of the house, including the terraces. Lewis (2009) has argued terrazzo had already been established through British connections, challenging the widely held belief that the terrazzo technique was imported and developed by Italian immigrants. He concedes that the Italian immigrants ‘took naturally to the trade’ and made it their own. Lewis does not consider it possible the Italian immigrants were not aware of those (obscure) examples and developed a successful trade in terrazzo construction. These skills remained invisible in the migrants’ ‘unskilled’ jobs but appeared in the reiterative practices of house-building, contrasting the narratives of migrants as lowly, passive, peasants, and as uncultivated, disorganised communities.

The suburban block is privately owned and spacious and has allowed for a proliferation of private worlds. This has generated interiors and house-worlds or enclaves of cultural expression within the broader suburban context. In this way, migrant houses, appropriating the suburban house and occupying the ubiquitous quarter-acre block, have inscribed spaces for the practices of different traditions, languages and rituals. Photographs, paintings or prints displayed on the walls of the interior referred to the village but did not necessarily depict a real place. These were ‘citations’ of an imagined or real homeland of the emigrant household. They were often placed at the entry or the circulation pathways in the house, and the migrant household members passed these homeland citations in their daily activities and movements. Butler has emphasised the reiterative sense of performative subjectivity—the everyday passing of the homeland reference produces a literary palimpsest of invented or real memory inscribed onto the domestic space. It thereby associates and aligns the migrant house with these other homelands, and it is this repetition that contradicts the British origin of the post-war Australian house (Troy 2000; Lozanovska 2011).

The interior of House Turquoise appears formal through lack of use. Overlaid onto this formal order is a layer of privacy expressed by drawn curtains and blinds, making the front rooms darker than is necessary. The privacy seems to be about concealment; the interior is hidden deep within the enveloping layers of the house. Paraphernalia of objects and photographs of a life history veil the walls. It is difficult to explain the life stories as they do not fit or resonate in the normative Australian contexts; they are in Butler’s terms not eligible for recognition. In contrast to the darker shades of privacy, the kitchen of House Turquoise is a naturally lit space. This was a lived space of everyday conversation during the preparation of a meal. The participant sat there in quiet contemplation.

Figure 8.5 House Nono illustrating the attention to building construction and detailing that produces an image of the migrant house.
Figure 8.6 House Aegean, like many migrant houses, has an elevated position, offering a view of the street and beyond, a characteristic that many participants commented about. The garden comprises plants and landscape design enabling a familiar setting for the migrant household, but distinguishing the migrant house.

The new houses were constructed to have an elevated position in relation to the street and many existing houses were selected for their elevated position. The participants commented positively on this characteristic, arguing it was about the expression of status and wealth, a comment that does not consider the migrant’s aesthetic or cultural preferences (Lozanovska 2011; Apperly, Irving and Reynolds 1989). The elevated position produced a structure for surveillance such that the parents could look over the children playing in the street (Gantala 2009, 25). And it produced distant views over the terrain. The picturesque image of the convent to the north, a hybrid mixture of Italianate and Gothic revival architecture, and the exotic deciduous trees adorning its gardens are seen from the first-storey rear terrace of House Aegean. This view is a citation of somewhere else, an imaginary place in (southern) Europe, yet this aesthetic is integral to an Australian nineteenth-century eclectic style.

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Figure 8.7 Distant view from the rear terrace of House Aegean illustrating the layering between real landscape and imaginary place.

Literature on gardens has proposed that many migrant gardens are places in which creative labour is expended to symbolise connections to homeland and to Australia and creating a garden in the host country is an early stage of accepting the new country, making the unfamiliar familiar (Morgan, Rocha and Poynting 2005, 93). All the houses that were studied (except for the worker’s cottage) had ornamental and edible gardens and maintained a range of fruit trees, vegetables and herbs (Lozanovska 2009). Large backyards and front yards are characteristic of all suburban houses; the difference is the detail and use (Chessell 2004, 2–6). The formation of the Anglo-Australian national identity, evoked as part of the colonisation process, involved garden cultivation of the land otherwise perceived as hostile (Holmes, Martin and Mirmohamadi 2008). Southern European immigrants, however, would use a different variety of plants and landscape aesthetic to fabricate and adorn the front gardens as revealed by the cacti and the white pebbles of some of the houses. The migrants would cultivate vegetables, raise small livestock and prepare farm produce, as they had learnt to use agricultural methods in the villages that many came from. These practices differentiated migrants from aspiring Anglo-Australians, who had not engaged or were moving away from edible gardens, illustrating how the host–guest structure was inscribed onto home-making practices (Chessell 2004, 4).

The backyard of the migrant house enables migrants to re-create landscapes with familiar plants, restore smells and tastes and enable skill in gardening and cooking practices, as seen in the Northcote examples. Many had special cooking and food preparation facilities. Since coming
from a village in Italy, Household Abruzzo tends a vegetable garden, where she has lemon, mandarin and persimmon trees. Her husband, who passed away nineteen years ago, built a concrete barbeque still used for making tomato sauce; she also makes wine and salami, and all prepared foods are stored in the cellar. The migrant stories demonstrate that diverse everyday practices evident in gardens and backyards produce a sense of creativity and thereby exceed the subjected roles of the migrants in their lowly positions as unskilled labourers. This migrant suburban creativity negotiates and transforms symbols of Australia through reiterative “citation” practices referring to other homelands (Morgan, Rocha and Poynting 2005).

Like the other houses, and yet also exceptional, is the House Bitola, which comprises a 6aBqa, a vibrant and large vegetable garden, mature trees, flowers, two dogs and an aviary. The members of the Bitola household were urban dwellers before migrating to Australia. This other world is thus not imported from the homeland, but an enclave of a lively nature, produced within the diaspora framework of an immigrant house and, in this case, a Macedonian diaspora in Australia. In her ethnographic study on material culture of Turkish immigrants in Vienna, especially practices of home decoration, Savas has argued that objects do not have traditional connections with prior pre-migration contexts or ethnic associations. Rather they
its essential stagnation denies life and resembles death. The migrant wants to live. It is not poverty alone that forces him to emigrate. Through his own individual effort he tries to achieve the dynamism that is lacking in the situation into which he [sic] is born. (Berger and Mohr 1975, 32)

Migrants have chosen to live, but Butler’s theory has assisted in analysing the processes of subjectivation that follow this choice. This includes how to qualify as a body that has access to the domain of cultural intelligibility (Sayad 2004). One tendency for the migrant is a preoccupation with and an endless process of attending to the house. The elderly resident who had acquired the worker’s cottage, House Turquoise, has described the house as “qypyK Kyka,” a house that is bad (Lozanovska 2008). He talked about his difficulty, discomfort and lack of fit with the house. The elderly inhabitant was in his early nineties when the interviews were conducted, and for more than thirty years, had tried to make the house better with various colours and textures. The house was sold, transformed into a heritage aesthetic and resold at a much higher price. The regulatory apparatus erases differential practices and reabsorbs practices into a normative agenda.

NOTES

1. These issues can be dealt with from various theoretical perspectives: Lozanovska (1997, 2004).
2. By 2006, 35 percent of the Melbourne metropolitan area’s population was born overseas.
3. The progressive work by Jean Craig (alias Martin) is informative in this context.
4. An image that is evident in the houses of both studies is the mixture of Australian icons (Hills Hoist) and symbols of migrant space (outdoor kitchen and concrete cooking facilities).
5. This landscape makes evident the intuitive awareness of the dry climate, unacknowledged in the environmental discourse.
6. The Macedonian word 6aBqa (Bavcha) refers specifically to a vegetable garden. The idea of edible landscape made popular with new environmental paradigms makes no reference to this history of the 6aBqa.

REFERENCES


Stories that migrants found the aesthetic appearance and organisation of existing typologies such as the terrace house unusual unfolded in the studies. Migrants have perceived the changes they made on the existing houses as improvements “before there were very bad houses, but the new Australians bought the houses and made them better” (Gantala 2009, 40; Redfern 2008). Contrasting the popular and academic criticism that migrants ruined the heritage of the existing houses, migrants identify how they have modernised the houses, making them brighter and cleaner (Lozanovska 2008; Allon 2008). The migrant’s wish to assimilate is checked by the scope and limit of the norm: assimilation is not only the dissolving into the regulatory apparatus of power through reiterative practice, but becoming a part of defining the norm, and this includes “citations” that are related to the house but unrelated to the typology of the Australian house. In this sense, the proliferation and manifestation of migrant houses redefines the cultural norm of the house in Australia. Whether this evolves into a ‘potentially productive crisis’ depends on the interest and representation given to the empirical manifestation on the ground: there is no guarantee of recognition as an Australian house, even if there has been an emergence of the migrant house as a type.

Relations between the migrant and the house are invigorated through the repetitive nature of building, adapting, making and maintenance of the migrant house. Performative subjectivity as a reiterative practice is also temporal and a process. Everyday inhabitation and interaction with new physical conditions and new materialities produce an extension of the migrant’s sense of being. The house as cultural product extends the migrant’s agency into the social and cultural fields of the community, the neighbourhood and the accumulative production of the Australian city.